



PALM Expert

If you have trouble with your Palm's text-entry system, allow Julian Prokaza to introduce you to some alternatives. There's everything from handwriting recognition to word completion to make input easy



LIFEDRIVE AND TREO PATCHES

PalmOne has released software updates for the recently launched LifeDrive and Treo 650. The LifeDrive patch, available at www.palmone.com/us/support/downloads/lifedrive/lifedrive_update.html, fixes intermittent connection problems with some Linksys and Belkin routers.

The Treo 650 patch, from www.palmone.com/us/support/downloads/treo650updater/unlockedgsm.html, updates unlocked handsets to version 1.13 and adds a handful of enhancements, including better call quality and an updated version of VersaMail. The patch also improves the Treo 650's memory handling.

COBALT SMARTPHONE SURFACES

Despite rumours to the contrary, Palm OS Cobalt is alive and kicking, just about. Oswin Technology displayed a prototype smartphone running the next generation of the Palm OS at the PalmOS DevCon at the end of May.

The chocolate bar-sized phone has a 240x320 screen and, come production, will include a 2-megapixel camera. It uses a mobile phone keyboard rather than a QWERTY thumb board, but the screen is also touch sensitive.

While the super-crisp screen is particularly impressive, Oswin Technology will have to stir up interest from OEMs if the phone is to progress beyond the prototype stage. You can see photos of it at www.palminfocenter.com/view_story.asp?id=7874.

LIFEDRIVE COMPATIBILITY ISSUES

PalmOne's new LifeDrive handheld is undeniably impressive, but it's winning few fans among developers. Many programs won't run on it, apparently because of changes in the way the Dynamic Input Area works. PalmOne isn't forthcoming about those changes, which has left developers trying to reverse-engineer the device to work it out. Others refuse to support the LifeDrive until palmOne helps them. We'll bring you more information as the story develops, but meanwhile you can read one developer's sentiments at www.fitaly.com/board/palmfitaly/posts/4995.html.

The Apple Newton nearly put paid to handwriting recognition on handheld computers, but US Robotics managed to rescue the idea with the original Palm Pilot in 1996. By getting users to learn the shapes of its own simplified character set, rather than the other way round, the Pilot's Graffiti system ran well on low-specification hardware and gave great results.

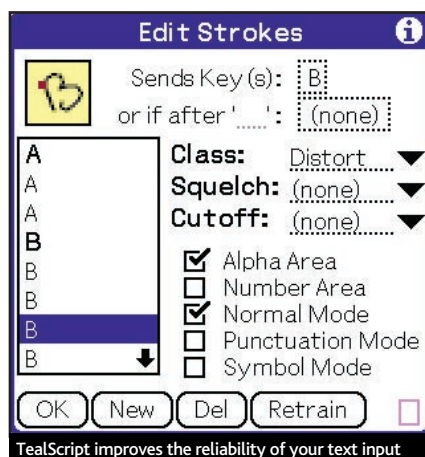
Patent problems with Xerox's own text-entry system led Palm, as it was then known, to dump Graffiti in 2003 and replace it with Graffiti 2. The changes were minor and mostly to do with using double strokes for some characters rather than single ones. This made Graffiti 2 a bit easier for new users to pick up, but Graffiti 1 users complained of slower input speeds and accuracy problems.

If you don't like Graffiti 2, what can you do? You can't buy new Graffiti 1-equipped Palm OS handhelds any more, although you can install it on a new handheld if you know where to look online, but there are several other stylus-based text-entry systems for Palm OS devices.

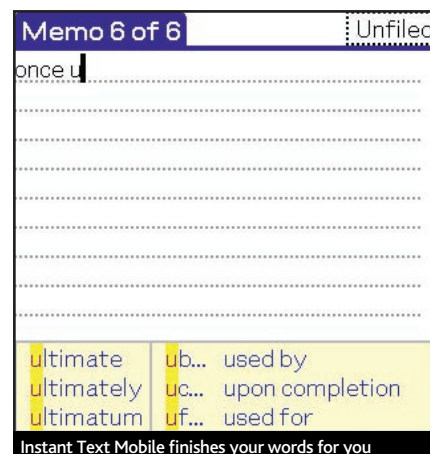
THE WRITING ON THE WALL

TealPoint's TealScript (\$30, around £16, www.tealpoint.com/softscrp.htm) was one of the first Graffiti substitutes to appear for Palm OS, but it's more of an enhancement than a replacement for the stock system. The current version supports character sets from both versions of Graffiti, so you can pick and choose the character strokes you prefer. It also has an assortment of alternates that widen the range of strokes for each character.

A default installation of TealScript should help with most Graffiti accuracy problems, and you can tweak the program to improve things further. You can adjust the writing angle, opt to write on the usual input area or anywhere on the screen and even create a capital letter hotspot for Graffiti 1 handhelds that lack this Graffiti 2 addition. Delving into its more arcane options is trickier than it



TealScript improves the reliability of your text input

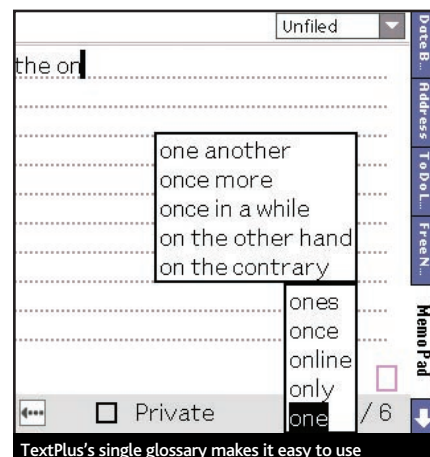


should be though, as the HTML manual has lots of text but no graphics, and a screenshot or nine would work wonders.

WORD COMPLETION

While TealScript will solve most Graffiti input problems, it does nothing to alleviate the tedium of its one-character-at-a-time approach. That's where word completion can help. This attempts to guess the word you're going to write based on its first few letters, at which point it displays one or more suggestions for you to choose from, removing the need to finish writing it in full.

Instant Text Mobile (\$25, around £14, www.textware.com) is one such program that has the distinction of coming with several predefined glossaries of words for such subjects as business, computers and medicine. It covers phrase macros too, so you can write 'tkl' and have the program replace it with 'thank you for your recent letter,' for example. TealScript doesn't come with a glossary of commonly used words and phrases, but you can create one yourself easily enough.





TextPlus (\$20, around £11, www.smartcell.com/id20.htm) does pretty much the same thing as Instant Text Mobile, but it has just a single glossary of words that are far more useful for day-to-day use, rather than custom glossaries. It's a bit more obtrusive than Instant Text Mobile, as suggested word and phrase lists can be lengthy and extend all the way up the screen, obscuring what you're writing. Instant Text Mobile, on the other hand, keeps suggestions at the bottom of the screen and you can limit their size.

HANDWRITING RECOGNITION

The best solution would be joined-up handwriting recognition, but although Palm OS is nearly a decade old and possesses more than enough processing power, no such program exists. The closest thing at the moment is Decuma Alphabetic, which Sony used to bundle with its Cliés.

Alphabetic (\$30, around £16, www.zicorp.com/decumaalphabetic.htm) uses ordinary letters, numbers and symbols for input, and you write them on a line at the bottom of the screen rather than in little boxes. Unfortunately, the input area is rather cramped and has room for only two or three words at a time, and you can only write non-cursively. We found the accuracy to be a bit hit and miss, but then writing legibly in a non-joined up way is an art that most people have forgotten by the time they've left secondary school. Unless you're adept at writing neatly, it's easier to learn the simple strokes of Graffiti rather than retrain yourself to write in a way that enables you to use Decuma Alphabetic successfully.

TOUGH DECISION

If this foray into Palm OS handwriting recognition programs has revealed anything, it's that there is still no one-for-all stylus-based text-entry system for Palm OS. We think TealScript is worth a test drive, but then we're fans of Graffiti. Nevertheless, for the few days we had the demo version installed, character recognition rate noticeably improved – and it was great to lose the double-stroke characters from Graffiti 2. **CS**

CONTACT

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If there is anything you would like to see covered in *Palm Expert*, please contact us at the address below

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REVIEW ONSCREEN KEYBOARD

ANIMATORSOFT Mini-Keyboard

RATING ★★★★★

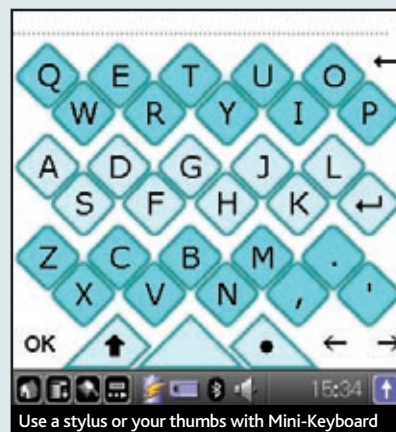
PRICE \$25 (around £14)

DETAILS www.animatorsoft.com/mini-kbd

A separate keyboard isn't a very portable solution for those with an aversion to the stylus, but an onscreen keyboard is much more practical. Mini-Keyboard is a nifty little program that displays a small QWERTY keyboard on the screen, which you can type on. Hunt-and-peck typists can use the stylus, and the keys are just large enough to let you use your thumbs too.

Unfortunately, activating the keyboard requires a stylus stroke and text entry appears on the program's own screen rather than that of the application from which it was activated. In portrait mode, the keyboard also uses a novel compressed layout that takes a bit of getting used to. Switch to landscape mode, though, and you get the real deal.

Mini-Keyboard works surprisingly well and is reminiscent of typing on a Psion Series 3. The only real downside is that it leaves fingerprints all over the screen, making a screen protector a non-optional extra.



Use a stylus or your thumbs with Mini-Keyboard

REVIEW FILE MANAGER

HANDS HIGH SOFTWARE WiFile Pro

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE \$30 (around £16)

DETAILS www.handshigh.com/html/wifile.html

Palm OS handhelds with WiFi or Bluetooth have no problem getting online, but talking to a network is another matter. WiFile Pro solves this problem: it's a file manager that can talk not only to Windows, Mac OS X, UNIX and NetWare networks, but also to FTP and WebDAV servers.

The program works as a tree-structured file manager, and it takes just a couple of seconds to work out its operation. You make connections to servers individually, but it's easy enough and an optional wizard simplifies things still further.

As long as you have a wired, WiFi or Bluetooth connection, WiFile Pro connects seamlessly and you can copy files to and from a memory card. You can open files from a server on the handheld (Microsoft Office documents in Documents to Go, for example) and stream MP3s using a program such as AeroPlayer.



Get your Palm on the local network with WiFile

Q&A: HOW CAN I RESET WITHOUT A PC?

Q Last month you advised a reader on fixing a Palm that perpetually crashed, even after resetting. The solution was sound, but it relied on having access to a PC for HotSync purposes. What do you do if you're away from your computer when your Palm decides that it's going to crash on every reset?

IP Linny

A Palm OS handhelds have a useful startup mode that manages to bypass any programs that load automatically after a reset. This usually alleviates a boot loop error, enabling you to

track down and remove the offending program. This is known as a warm reset, and on palmOne devices you do it by holding down the scroll up button and pressing the reset button.

Devices with a resolution of 320x480 may not show their virtual Graffiti area after a warm reset, which makes it tricky to work with them. A warm reset always returns you to the Prefs screen though, so use the Buttons option to assign one of the application launch buttons to Applications. You can then get to all your installed programs and remove any that may be causing the problem. A normal reset should then return your Palm to working order.